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Opinion • Commentary

The Reporter Who *Was* a Spy

Washington.

CONTRARY to widely published reports, Nicholas Daniloff is not the first American journalist to be arrested by the Russians on charges of being a spy. This rather dubious honor belongs to Marguerite Harrison, who was Moscow correspondent for *The Baltimore Sun* and Associated Press in 1920.

By Nathan Miller

And Mrs. Harrison was not only arrested, but was imprisoned for more than a year. But unlike Mr. Daniloff, the *U.S. News & World Report* correspondent who has just been released amid denials that he was engaged in espionage, she later acknowledged that she had indeed worked for American intelligence.

Mrs. Harrison's background was hardly that of the typical spy. She was a young Baltimore society woman — her sister was married at one time to Gov. Albert C. Ritchie — whose husband had died leaving her with a son and a mountain of unpaid bills. Through friends, she obtained a job as assistant society editor of *The Sun*, moved up to music and drama critic and was one of the first women to become general assignment reporters.

Fluent in French, Italian and German, she was assigned to cover the Paris peace conference at the end of World War I. With the knowledge and approval of Frank R. Kent, the paper's managing editor, she also agreed to become an undercover agent for the U.S. Army's Military Intelligence Division. The use of journalists as intelligence operatives is now controversial, but it was not an uncommon practice then. Relations between the press and government were less confrontational, and the British Secret Service often used newspaper correspondents as agents.

In Paris, Mrs. Harrison worked with Col. Ralph Van Deman, chief of counterintelligence for the American delegation. Van Deman was worried about Bolshevik propaganda that was appearing among American occupation troops on the Rhine. Some of the leaflets were traced to Robert Minor, a leading American radical and later the Communist Party candidate for mayor of New York, and he was arrested in the occupied sector of Germany. But there was insufficient evidence for a conviction and Van Deman assigned Mrs. Harrison to the case.

Posing as a writer for a socialist newspaper, she convinced one of Minor's associates to give her the name of the man who had printed the leaflets. The printer identified Minor as the person to whom they had been delivered. Minor was never brought to trial, however, for the charges were dropped at the request of Col. E.M. House, President Wilson's chief adviser and a friend of the Minor family. In the end, the episode was to prove more costly to Mrs. Harrison than to Minor.

Undoubtedly as a result of her intelligence contacts, Mrs. Harrison was the first American journalist to reach Berlin during the revolutionary upheavals of 1919 and covered the birth of the German republic. Not long afterward, she slipped over the Polish frontier into the Soviet Union. The country was on the verge of anarchy; civil war raged between the Bolsheviks and White Russian counter-revolutionaries. An Allied economic blockade contributed to the chaos and there was question whether the communist regime could survive much longer.

Although Mrs. Harrison had no visa and foreign journalists were suspect, she was allowed to remain in Moscow, the new capital of the Soviet Union. She moved about freely and interviewed key government figures, including Leon Trotsky, the commissar for war and founder of the Red Army.

In both her newspaper dispatches and secret reports to MID — smuggled out by diplomats leaving the country — she provided an objective account of conditions in Russia, including her opinion that the Soviet regime would survive. She also supplied Military Intelligence with the names of Soviet agents dispatched to the United States.

Several months after her arrival, Mrs. Harrison was arrested by the Cheka, the Soviet secret police, and taken to the dreaded Lubyanka Prison for questioning. Before the revolution, the building had been the headquarters of an insurance company and she noted with grim amusement a sign over the doorway: "It is prudent to insure your life."

Much to her surprise, she learned the Cheka had known of her links to American intelligence all along. When she protested her innocence, the interrogators showed her an article from the *Army and Navy Journal* describing her work in the Minor affair and a copy of one of her reports that had obviously been filched from MID's own files.

The penalty for espionage was death, but the Cheka offered Mrs. Harrison an alternative. If she would inform on the other members of the foreign colony, she would be allowed to continue her work as a correspondent. Feeling utterly trapped, Mrs. Harrison agreed. "In that moment I renounced everything that hitherto made up my existence," she later recalled. "It was finished — and I felt as if I had already died and had been born into a new nightmare world."

To herself, she resolved to provide only partial or misleading information in the hope of staying out of prison to gather more intelligence. In this period, she scored her most important intelligence coup.

The Russians had hired an American expert to make a detailed assessment of Soviet industry, but rejected his report as overly pessimistic. Because of the sensitivity of the information possessed by the

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American, he was denied permission to leave the country. Expecting to be arrested at any moment, he slipped a copy of his report to Mrs. Harrison who persuaded a Latvian diplomatic courier to deliver it to the U.S. military attache in Riga.

"I knew this procedure could not continue indefinitely, though," she said later. She was soon rearrested and bundled off to Lubyanka. This time she was imprisoned more than a year despite the efforts of the U.S. government and her journalistic employers to obtain her freedom. Throughout the campaign to secure her release, they all denied that she had been engaged in espionage.

Eventually, Mrs. Harrison was released by the Soviets in an effort to obtain American food supplies to relieve a raging famine. Although conditions for all prisoners were harsh, she said she had not been mistreated.

Upon her return to the United States, Mrs. Harrison was debriefed by Gen. Marlborough Churchill, the head of MID, who told her she had provided the agency "with more information about Russia than any other agent." He also explained that a reserve officer later discovered to have been a communist sympathizer had probably supplied the Soviets with a copy of the report that had incriminated her.

And the *Army and Navy Journal* article? Shaking his head, Churchill couldn't explain that.

Mr. Miller is the author of "Secret Warriors: The Hidden History of American Espionage," *which is to be published next year.*